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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003179

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: SENIOR THAI OFFICIALS BRIEF EAP

DAS JOHN

REF: A. BANGKOK 2335 (THAIS BEGIN TALKS WITH PULO)

■B. BANGKOK 7527 (RTG REACHES OUT TO SEPARATISTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

■1. (C) SUMMARY: In separate meetings on May 21 and 22, Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vansatidya and NSC SecGen Winai, respectively, told EAP DAS Eric John and the Ambassador that the RTG was developing more effective information on southern Thai insurgents and working to improve RTG policy and operations in the South. Both admitted that government missteps and information stovepiping have hurt efforts to catch suspects and build local support for the state. Chidchai emphasized that the RTG is now focusing on winning the hearts and minds of the southern population and will set up a new, central coordinating body for civil affairs programs. Winai confirmed that the RTG was involved in "unofficial" negotiations with separatist elements. A recent hostage incident -- where two government teachers were severely beaten by a mob of Malay-Muslim villagers -- was a serious incident. Both Chidchai and Winai expressed appreciation for quiet U.S. cooperation on the South but emphasized that we must keep our distance to keep the problem from becoming "internationalized." END SUMMARY

■2. (SBU) Over dinner on May 21, Deputy Prime Minister Police General Chidchai Vansatidya briefed EAP DAS Eric John and the Ambassador on his most recent trip to the South. In a separate May 22 meeting, DAS John and the Ambassador met with National Security Council (NSC) Secretary General Winai Phattiyakul to discuss RTG southern policy and strategy.

POINT MEN ON THE SOUTH OPTIMISTIC

■3. (C) Both DPM Chidchai and Gen. Winai -- who serve as the point men on southern policy within the RTG -- offered upbeat assessments and indicated that the RTG was making progress in the South. Chidchai has made 36 trips to the troubled region since taking the lead on South policy in June 2005. According to Chidchai, the situation was improving, and he felt safe traveling to all areas in the three restive provinces (Note: Chidchai travels under heavy guard and rarely, if ever, stays overnight. End Note).

■4. (C) Both Chidchai and Winai said that police had identified nearly 500 suspected militants and arrested around 200 so far. Based on these arrests, the RTG is finally developing a clear picture of the insurgency. Thai intelligence sources have identified groups operating at the village level and were developing a better understanding of how militants were recruiting and indoctrinating. (Note: Winai also said local religious teachers (Ustaz) were the primary recruiters. End Note) The Emergency Decree for the three far southern provinces, enacted in July 2005, had been invaluable in generating leads and information about the southern insurgents, he added. Winai was optimistic, but emphasized that addressing the violence would be a long-term problem.

OFFICIALS ACKNOWLEDGE GOVERNMENT MISTAKES

■5. (C) Chidchai and Winai were both candid about the series of policy and operational mistakes made by the RTG. Winai said decades old grievances in the South had been re-awakened by serious policy mistakes made in recent years. Malay Muslims in the South had an inferiority complex and were hyper-sensitive to slights. Winai likened government policy mistakes to "adding fertilizer to already fertile ground." However, the government had "learned a lot in the last two years," and currently felt that they were on the right track. Chidchai boasted that while he "understood the problem from the start," the two years prior to his stewardship had been marked by weak management of the issue. The people of the South blame the government for everything. Chidchai explained that in order to be successful the RTG must educate police about the local culture and build up popular support for the government through education, development and social projects. To meet this need, Chidchai is moving to set up a coordinating center for civil affairs, under the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command.

16. (C) DAS John asked Winai how the RTG was working to address stovepiping among security services -- widely blamed for contribution to the situation. Winai said the government was well aware of the problem and was trying to give local officials greater autonomy to address the violence. The Thai 4th Army, based in Yala province, had been given full authority to lead on security issues and was cooperating with the Police forward command.

NEGOTIATIONS?...YES

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Gen. Winai if negotiations with insurgent groups were part of the government's strategy (refftels). Winai confirmed that members of the government were conducting an "unofficial" dialogue with groups that they believed to be credible interlocutors.

MOST RECENT HOSTAGE INCIDENT OF SERIOUS CONCERN

18. (C) The May 19 hostage taking of two government teachers by a mob of villagers in Narathiwat was of serious concern for RTG officials. A mob of villagers had beaten the teachers, both female Buddhists, after police arrested a local man wanted in connection with the September 2005 murder of two Marines in the province. One teacher remains in a coma. The incident produced outraged reactions in the national media. Winai had been in close consultation with PM Thaksin and acting DPM Chidchai following the incident. As a result of the attack the government decided to temporarily close 100 schools in Narathiwat until security could be improved and has vowed to immediately mount rescue operations in future hostage instances.

WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. DO?...STAY OUT OF IT

19. (C) In response to DAS John's query about what more the U.S. could do to help, Chidchai expressed gratitude for current training and assistance, but cautioned that any new programs must not be based in the South, or publicly labeled as focused on that region. Winai echoed these remarks, indicating that our current assistance was adequate. He appreciated our concern over the situation, and noted our already close security relationship, especially between intelligence agencies, was producing results. Winai confirmed that there remained no direct evidence of links to international terrorists. He opined that the South had not become "internationalized" because the U.S. was not directly associated with the situation and indicated that the best way to keep it that way was to minimize the U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement.

10. (U) DAS John has not had the opportunity to clear this message.
BOYCE